BAPTIZE EVERYBODY?

June 14, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Deuteronomy 4:32-40
Matthew 28:16-20

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..."
--Matthew 28:19 (RSV)

I live on the basis of the maxim - that one should be wary of folk who know the whole truth about anything: political parties, music, religion or the best-ever baseball team to take the field. The reason for my wariness is that, in fact, I already know the whole truth about politics, music, religion and two years on the Near North Side has not changed my confidence in the truth about the best ever baseball team. In that dynamic is a fascinating and sometimes disturbing story - suggested by words of Jesus - "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..."

Have you ever wondered what it's like to be on the receiving end of Christian evangelism, particularly the more combative type; to be told in essence, that the God in whom you believe, to whom you have been praying, from whom you have received comfort, sustenance, and meaning, doesn't exist? I wonder what it's like to be informed that the religious ceremonies which have given order and symmetry to life are superstitious pagan rituals.

I have learned through experience that to tell someone that his/her beliefs are utterly wrong is not a good way to begin a conversation. I know that when someone does that to me, some of my least attractive characteristics are stimulated and awakened. I hear the faint but clear trumpet call to battle, my conversation partner becomes an opponent and verbal combat is about to begin. I have learned through experience that if my purpose is to share my truth with another human being, the best way to begin is to relate somehow to the truth the other person possesses: to acknowledge that the other has access to truth, to respect the other, particularly that truth to which the other clings tightly and which gives order to his life, i.e. his religion.

I have concluded that to be on the receiving end of some of the more belligerent Christian evangelism is to be relegated to the status of spiritual imbecility, or at best, ignorant immaturity. And I further conclude and propose to you, that the evangelistic zeal which assumes that we have all the truth and others have none of the truth and that Jesus

wants us to turn everyone into Christians just like us, regardless of how we do it, seriously diminishes and misrepresents the God around whom the whole enterprise is supposed to revolve. It is also the prelude usually to real historic disaster and tragedy. In their more extreme expressions both Christianity and Islam take that position. And when they happen to meet in the same neighborhood, trouble soon follows.

Now a brief, but necessary theological interlude. The theologians have always known that as soon as human beings start to talk about God, God is going to be limited by the perceptions, imaginations, intellects of the people doing the talking. As soon as you talk about God, as soon as you use the word God itself - you limit God, which is a form of idolatry. At some time in his or her faith journey, every student of theology concludes that the only honest posture is silence before the unknowable mystery of the holy other God. But if that were the rule the theologians would be out of work and so at our best we try to remind ourselves that the theological enterprise - the enterprise of thinking about God, whether it is in Swift Hall at the University of Chicago, or this pulpit, or your bedroom when you say your nightly prayers - the enterprise needs to begin with a profound modesty. When God is no longer a mystery: when God is altogether known and understood - God is no longer God, but merely the projection of the mind that thinks it understands. Your God Is Too Small, J. B. Phillips said in a book title. There is a sense in which that is always the case. My perceptions, my heart and mind are human: my God or at least my belief in God is limited by my own humanity. Thus Martin Luther could talk about "the Hidden God" who exists beyond all human religious systems. In our day that intriguing concept was echoed by Paul Tillich under the guise "the God beyond theism." It is a mind-stretching, discomforting and altogether healthy concept. But it is not, in any way, a universally accepted idea. In fact, the tilt of history is in the other direction. The God of religion can be understandable, simple, knowable, familiar, manageable, provincial and rather small and a comfortable reflection of the particular people...

In South Africa churches propose, with a straight face, that apartheid is in the divine order of things. Adolph Hitler had really very little difficulty finding religious types who would represent God as an Aryan who had so turned his back on his Semitic children that they could legitimately be led into the gas chambers. It sounds to me sometimes, listening to the cacophony of religious zealotry on Michigan Avenue on a Saturday - my ears assaulted by the Pentecostal panel truck blaring John 3:16... fending off a variety of tracts designed to save my soul by announcing that God so loves the world he is going to send me to hell if I don't come over to the side of the earnest, smiling young man thrusting the message into my face... one could conclude from it all that God is a Baptist or a Methodist or a Pentecostal or a Roman Catholic and that God's agenda for all creation is to get everybody saying the same creed and singing out of the same hymnal.

The issue has been around a long time. The Deuteronomy text this morning contains the theological breakthrough of monotheism - "there is no other." Did you hear it in there - back on the edge of history? Moses is addressing Israel, recalling their experience in Egypt and Exodus - "To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God: there is no

other." That's the radical word that comes to Israel - there is one God: Yahweh is God's name. That is the great genius of Judaism. God is one - but as soon as the word is out of Moses' mouth an internal argument begins between those who want to proceed narrowly, - God's oneness is our private secret, our God is the real God, yours is a fake - and those who take the broad, universal road - the one God is Lord of the Babylonians too, only they use a different vocabulary. Remember the story of Jonah? When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, the point of the story is not the voyage and the big fish, although they get all the press. The point of the whole story is Jonah's theological provincialism. Jonah is certain that the Ninevites are rascals, pagans, sinners, utterly lost, absolutely wrong theologically and deserving of whatever they get which he assumes is judgment with a capital "J." That God loves Ninevites and that he is going to be merciful to them is a shattering thought to Jonah - much harder to swallow than he was for the whale and when the story ends the reader isn't sure Jonah ever got the point of the whole exercise.

At their better moments God's people know that they are chosen - not to be God's only children, but to show the world what it looks like to live as God's children, to show the world what human life is supposed to look like. God's children are to be a light - so the whole world can see. But there is always internal tension in the Bible between the broad humanitarian position and the tendency toward religious exclusiveness which sounds like a game of "mine is better than yours" - "my dad can lick your dad" - played on the vast stage of history.

It is there clearly in the life of Jesus. It surfaces every time he bumps into religious zealots of his day who cannot understand how he can associate with "them" - with obvious sinners.

It was the toughest issue facing the early Christian Church. When Matthew wrote his gospel, several decades after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the early Christians were asking themselves whether God cared enough about Gentiles for them to bother telling the story of Jesus in Gentile cities. Or should they, Jewish Christians, simply stay put, enjoy this new theological insight and look down their noses at the rest of the world.

Thus the Gospel of Matthew ends with this wonderful scene: the Risen Christ is on a mountain with his followers. It is a mountain very much like the mountain on which Moses negotiated the original covenant. It is the setting for what we know as the great Missionary Commission. "Go - to all the world making disciples." Just as the radical word to Israel was that there is one God for all the world - so our Lord here tells his followers that the Gospel is for the world - the whole world. The new word here was "all nations." The first and most important intent of our Lord's words was to break open the exclusivism of religion, to shatter the tempting comfortable provincialism which concludes that God cares mainly about me and people like me. Jesus' intent was to broaden the focus of the early Christians so they would become a church for the whole world.

And so, into the world his followers have gone, compelled by the soul-stirring vigor of the Great Commission. We have gone more faithfully when we have listened carefully to those to whom we have gone and

remembered God's great and passionate love for them. But there have been plenty of incidents when missionary zeal was simply reformulated provincialism. Not long after Jesus said the word, for instance, the Roman Empire became Christian by fiat and the historians tell us that one of the ways the Great Commission was fulfilled during the wars with Barbarian tribes was for the Legions to march the defeated tribe into the closest river - at sword point - for baptism... and a thousand years after men and women were being killed in the Coliseum for believing in Christ, Christians had turned the table and were killing men and women for not believing.

But more fascinating are the bursts of missionary activity through history which occurred when people listened and were receptive to God's Holy Spirit. The allure of the Island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland is in that. For hundreds of years, beginning in the sixth century, Irish monks lived there, the last body of land from which Ireland is visible, and from there sailed off for Great Britain and the Continent, telling the story of Jesus. Or the Jesuits, in the Far East, sometimes following, sometimes leading the trading companies. The powerful motion picture The Mission did a superb job I thought, telling the story of the incredible sacrifice and devotion of Christians under the power of the Great Commission. Or the thousands upon thousands of men and women who responded to the Great Commission in the last century and this, by going from America to China, Japan, Africa. Or today, the Presbyterians and Baptists and Lutherans who practice medicine in Zaire and Nicaragua and work for peace in Northern Ireland, or who persist in keeping the American University open in Beirut: the teachers, nurses, farmers and pastors who go today into all the world in the name of Jesus Christ - baptizing in his love and making disciples...

There is something about the Missionary Enterprise that embarrasses us sometimes. It has become fashionable intellectually to blame Christian missionaries for colonialism and the disregard and ruin of indigenous culture. The argument goes that missionaries were really just forerunners for Western business interests; that worse yet, missionaries brought more Western culture than Gospel and in the process trampled and ruined the culture of the people they were evangelizing. James Michener told the sad part of the story in Hawaii. But that is only part of the story and, in actuality, a very small part. Harvard Professor Lamin Sanneh, an African scholar, from Gambia, wrote an essay recently in the Christian Century that challenges the fashionable and popular anti-missionary position. Christian missionaries, the professor observes, were responsible for translating Scripture into 1800 languages and in the process were directly responsible for creating written language for many of them. That process, he argues, has enhanced and preserved indigenous culture. It has instilled awareness and pride in indigenous people and instead of supporting political oppression actually was the breeding ground for independence and nationalism which spelled the end of colonialism. The professor scolds Western Christians for their guilt complex about missionary activity and his is a word we need to hear. ["Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex," Christian Century, 4/8/87.]

But the old issue remains. It is raised by the text. It is the matter of religious exclusivism, the temptation to portray our news as the

only news. There is something about us apparently, that concludes that my truth has to be the only truth. And there is something about the time in which we live that needs the certainty, the absolute certainty which religious fundamentalism and evangelical exclusivism provides. Martin Marty observes the world-wide "resurgent fundamentalism of the kind that has gained political power in Shi'ite Islamic Iran... and is behind a powerful Opus Dei movement in the Roman Catholic Church, and which surfaces among belligerent American Protestants promoting Christian Yellow Pages," [Martin Marty, By Way of Response, p. 89]

In a world of ambiguity and rapid change and political instability, religious certainty has enormous appeal. But it is also a world growing ever smaller, a global village where all kinds of zealots now have access to weapons and mobility and can become terrorists. It is now a dangerous world when the absolute necessity for survival is the end of the kind of tribalism and religious zealotry we could afford in the past.

What the world needs is a theology which is committed to its truth - but at the same time appreciates pluralism and teaches respect as a fundamental virtue. We need to listen to scholars like African theologian John Mbiti who writes eloquently and poignantly. "God must have been active among African people as he was among the Jewish people...was he not there in other times and in such places as Mount Fugi and Mount Kenya as well as Mount Sinai." Mbiti notes the incredible growth of the Christian Church in Africa. In 1900 there were 9 million Christians in Africa, 7% of the population. In 1980 there were 200 million, 45% of the population. He writes: "The God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of traditional African religiosity. The missionaries who introduced the Gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God to our Continent. Instead, God brought them. They proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ. But they used the names of the God who was and is already known by African people." ["The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion," Theologians in Transition, p. 54,55]

Is the point of it all to get everybody singing out of the same hymnal? Saying the same creed? Using the same vocabulary? Does going into the world, making disciples, baptizing, mean turning the whole world into one big Southern Baptist Revival, or Roman Parish, or dour Scottish Kirk? Heaven forbid! In fact, the effort has not only not produced much peace and happiness, but has contributed a fair amount of intolerance, bloodshed and suffering to the sad story of history. "Making Christians," as an isolated imperative, is not the point. I am moved by Marty's simple, human integrity when he writes, "Never again approaches to mission that make God into a predator - dependent on my ability to pounce on others. Never can I make proselytism the focus of my relation to others." [Marty,op. cit., p. 111]

The good news is that there is another word, an alternative position which came to the early Christians who wrote the New Testament, particularly St. Paul - our first missionary. It is that God's purpose in creating a world and a human race in the world, God's purpose in becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ is to heal, to make whole, to reconcile the whole creation. Paul himself has to struggle to find words big enough to say it. God wants a creation at peace with itself - God wants all things to come

together - God wants to love all the children of the world so they will enjoy life and live it in peace and harmony and justice and joy. I find in that alternative Biblical word compelling power and relevance and an impulse to religious integrity and perhaps even theological bravery.

What is the missionary commission - to our age - to you and me? It is to go into all the world and tell the story of Jesus. It is to go into the world and tell about God's great love for the creation. Our task is not to shout louder than anybody else, argue harder and convince more thoroughly; it is to tell the story of God's love, to bear witness to God's love: to live out the liberating, joyful truth we have discovered.

Our missionary task is to go into this world and to baptize this culture, here and now, with the gentleness and justice of Jesus, not to fight it out on the street corners with colorful brochures and blaring bull horns. Our task is to go into a world that has heard bits and pieces of the story, and to live it, by baptizing hurting people with a love that values each one of them, and that respects them for their humanity. That is a radical word in our world. And it is a startlingly persuasive world when someone has the courage to live it. Evangelism does not mean slicker devices to persuade the customer to buy our product, marketing Jesus Christ like soap powder; it means to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ by the way we live life and by the way we are the church in this place. People are convinced when they see it: when in the name of Christ the homeless are sheltered, the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the grieving comforted, the guilty forgiven, the frightened encouraged, the lonely loved, the oppressed set free, and the story told.

Our job as disciples is not to be responsible for production quotas, toting up the scorecard of new converts, but simply to bear witness to the truth we have experienced in Jesus Christ, trusting that the activity of God's spirit in the world will do the persuading and that God, not the preacher, not the evangelism committee, not even the church, but God, is in charge of conversions.

At our best over the past 2,000 years we have heard the Commission and gone into all the world and told the story and lived the truth and people have believed it. Today the Great Commission is an invitation to believe radically and boldly that God's eternal love extends even to those who don't know about Jesus, or who do know but choose not to believe. It is an invitation to experience and tell about a love so big it includes all nations; a love so infinite and intimate it embraces each one of us; a love so powerful it brings new life, new freedom, new joy to those who receive it and know and live in it. It is an invitation to let go of the exclusivism which is so comfortable and so very tempting and to believe boldly that all things, even human history, are in the hands of God. It is an invitation to live the truth we have been given and to trust that in God's time, by God's grace, and through the incredible and inevitable power of God's love, there will be a day when

"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His Kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more."

use Col 1: 15-20

6-14-87

All praise to you great God for your love for the whole world.

Correct us when we act as if we are your only children.

Give us the grace of Christ to share our truth - by acknowledging our own hunger.

Give us courage and strength to live our truth - to be your faithful disciples.

All praise to you, great God - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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